Prairie Pages

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Illinois in the Gilded Age

The Fastest Growing State

Glossary

railroad hub — a location where many railroad lines meet

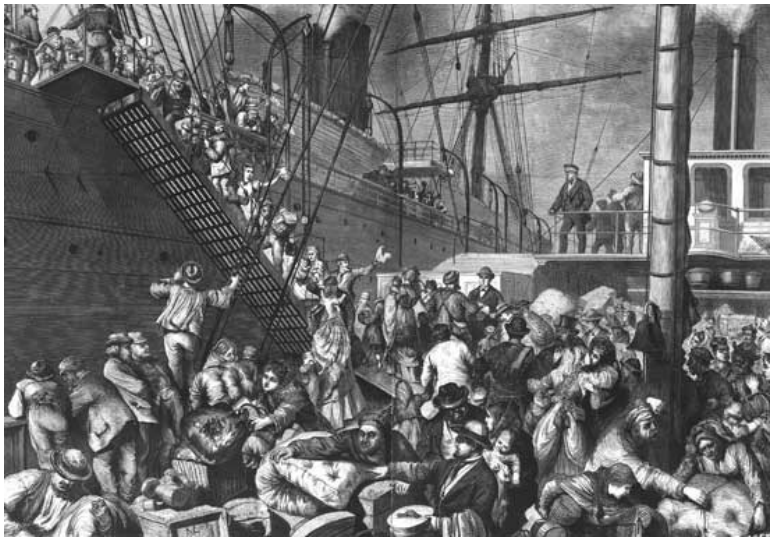
immigrant, immigrants — a person who comes o a country to live permanently

utopian community — an ideal, as perfect as possible, group of people living in one town or area

Illinois' location in the central part of the country and its access to land and water transportation routes helped it become the fastest-growing state in the mid 1800s. During and after the Civil War these advantages made Chicago the largest railroad hub in America, a major shipping center, and a prime location for the rapidly growing manufacturing, industrial, and agricultural businesses of the nation. Growing industry required a bigger work force. Many new industrial workers were recent arrivals to the United States from Europe. Illinois was a popular destination for European immigrants because it offered opportunities for work in manufacturing, farming, and other businesses that supported a growing population.

A Wave of New Americans

Many of the first immigrants to America came from the northern European countries of Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Germany, and Britain. Many Irish worked to build the Illinois & Michigan Canal and then brought their families to settle in the area. A large number of Germans settled in southwestern Illinois in Belleville and surrounding towns. A utopian community of Swedish settlers started the town of Bishop Hill. The immigrants went to cities throughout Illinois, including Chicago, where expanding industries required large numbers of unskilled workers. Many skilled workers also chose to settle in larger cities and towns



Irish and German Immigrants arriving in American.

reaper — a machine for cut and harvesting a crop such as wheat

The Gilded Age — a time in American history when everything seemed to be better than it actually was; to gild something means to cover an object with gold to make it look as though it is solid gold or to make it appear more valuable

where their work would be in demand. The Civil War slowed the number of Europeans moving to the United States, but immigration increased in the decades following the conflict**. ()**

A second wave of immigration saw increasing numbers of eastern and southern Europeans seeking a new life in America. From 1870 to 1890 the population of foreign-born people living in Illinois increased from about 500,000 to well over a million. Chicago attracted many of these new arrivals, especially after the 1871 Chicago Fire, when workers of all kinds were needed to rebuild the city. They came to Chicago from the eastern and southern European countries of Russia, Hungary, Poland, Bohemia, and Italy. Workers were also needed in the meatpacking operations at the Union Stockyards as well as the steel mills south of the city. Iron ore and lumber arrived from Minnesota and Wisconsin for processing into materials for use throughout the country. Chicago was the home of the McCormick reaper manufacturing plant, as well as massive grain elevators used to store the wheat before distribution. The shipyards along Lake Michigan as well as the shipping industry needed workers, too. All of this growth required many workers, and thousands upon thousands of the new immigrants filled these jobs in what historians call The Gilded Age.

Large factories needed energy, and the best and cheapest source of energy at that time was coal, and Illinois was rich in this resource. Miners dug the mineral from the ground and shipped thousands of railcars filled with coal north to Chicago and on to other parts of the country. Besides providing power to factories, coal was used to heat homes, and it was burned in stoves and ovens to cook food. Coal mining was a very important industry in central and southern Illinois. Many immigrants became the miners who tunneled beneath the prairie**.**

Coal Miner. Courtesy Northern Illinois University Libraries, <http://lincoln.lil.niu.edu>.

Labor Unions

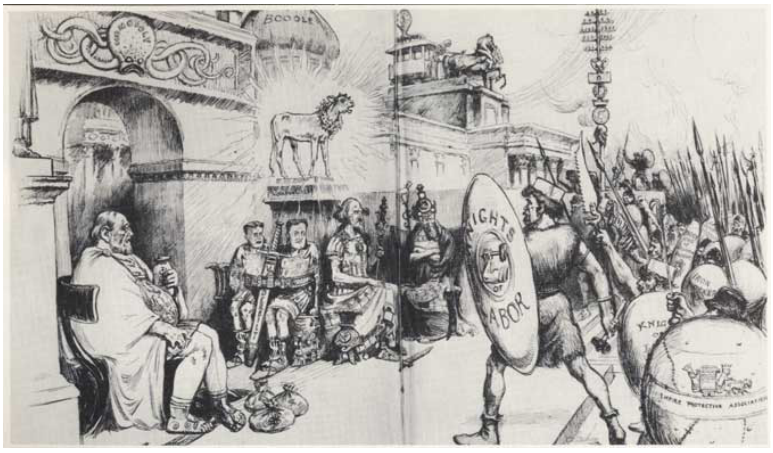
labor union — an organization of workers formed to improve their wages, benefits, and working conditions

child labor — the use of children of all ages for any type of work including working mines, factories, mills, and other places that are not allowed now; in the U.S., except for those working in family businesses or on family farms, no one younger that 16 is usually legally allowed to be employed (this does not included such things as baby-sitting, lawn mowing, snow shoveling, etc. when done by choice)

In 1870, more than half of Chicago residents were foreign-born, and many did not speak English. Workers in low-paying, unskilled factory jobs struggled to make enough money to support their families. Some worked six days a week, 12 to 14 hours each day. Just as the farmers of Illinois had banded together when they felt treated unfairly, the laborers in the factories, mines, and shipyards became angry about their dangerous working conditions, low pay, and lack of justice for workers. Organizers of labor unions recognized the dissatisfaction of many workers and recruited new members who were looking for ways to improve their lives.

Unions offered its members a powerful voice because no person stood alone—all the members of the union worked together. Many united voices carried more weight when workers bargained for fair wages and benefits. The workers were fighting the factory and mine owners to make the workday a reasonable length and to be paid extra if longer hours were necessary. The union workers wanted to stop child labor, improve working conditions, and to provide for workers and their families if they were hurt or killed on the job. But the rich and powerful men who controlled the railroads, factories, and mines were opposed to those goals. The owners and managers did not want to lose any of their wealth or power. Workers joined the new unions to bring about changes that would make their lives better. Railroad workers started unions in cities throughout Illinois. In West Belleville, the nation's first coal-miners' union was organized. In Chicago, the Knights of Labor was a very

Cartoon depicting Knight's of Labor members confronting business owners. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Digitization project Northern Illinois University Libraries, <http://lincoln.lil.niu.edu>.



large and powerful union that started its own political party.

economic depression — a period of low employment and high costs

In 1873, the United States suffered a severe economic depression. Many businesses were forced to close their doors. Some companies cut workers' pay or fired workers to save money. The harsh economic conditions of 1873 caused more workers to join labor unions. Conditions for workers grew even more difficult during these hard times. The division between management and workers grew even wider during the 1870s.

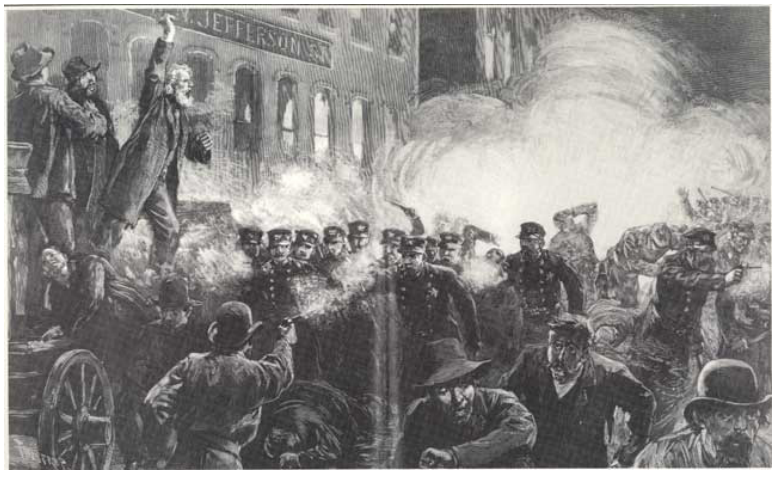
strike — to stop work in order to force an employer to listen to a demand for a change in wages, benefits, or working conditions

In 1877, railroad workers decided to strike as a way to show their employers that they would not stand for any more pay cuts. At that time Illinois had the most miles of track in the United States. A strike in Illinois would have an impact all across the country. Workers walked off the job in East St. Louis on July 21 and were soon followed by railroad workers in Peoria, Carbondale, Aurora, Peoria, and Chicago. Violence broke out between the police and strikers when the companies tried to run the trains with other workers. Nineteen people died during the violence in Chicago. Governor Shelby Cullom ordered the Illinois National Guard troops to stop the strikers. Army troops were also used to stop the strikers and to keep the trains running.

Haymarket Riot

Economic conditions did begin to improve, however tension between labor and management continued. In 1886, a disagreement in Chicago between the McCormick Harvester Company and union workers resulted in a bloody confrontation that left many dead and many others injured.

Haymarket Riot Explodes in Violence. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.



Early in 1886, labor unions were trying to establish an eight-hour day as a fair standard for all workers. Union leaders in Chicago called for a one-day general strike on May 1 to support this idea. On May 3 there was a shooting at the McCormick Reaper plant when management decided to fire employees who had participated in the strike. Union leaders and others who supported the workers called for a protest meeting on May 4 at

Haymarket Square. Toward the end of the meeting, after a series of peaceful speeches, the police were told to move in and break up the gathering. A bomb exploded, killing one police officer instantly and injuring many other officers, seven of whom later died. Some of the remaining police officers opened fire, and many fleeing protesters were shot.

The bomb thrower was never identified. However, eight men were rounded up and tried in court for their involvement in the Haymarket Square Riot. The men were not accused of the attack against the police, but were charged with organizing the event and creating an atmosphere that promoted violence. Seven men were given the death sentence and one a 15-year prison term. Newspapers and public opinion came out strongly against the union organizers and their supporters, but many other Americans were disturbed by the trial and the murder verdicts. Illinois Governor Richard J. Oglesby commuted two of the death sentences to life sentences. One of the Haymarket rioters committed suicide before he could be executed, and the remaining four were hanged on November 11, 1887.

commute, commuted — to change to something less severe

exposition — a public exhibition or show

The violence continued for many years in Illinois as workers struggled to obtain fair wages, safe working condition, and a reasonable way to resolve problems with their employers.

Columbian Exposition of 1893. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

Columbian Exposition of 1893

In contrast to the events surrounding the labor movement came the crowning event of the Gilded Age. Illinois was selected to host the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Some

people just called it the Chicago Exposition or the Chicago Fair. From May 1 to October 30 a magnificent fair was held to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America. Chicago had battled St. Louis, Washington D.C., and New York City for the right to host the fair. A newspaper reporter from New York was so upset at the loud bragging by Chicagoans that he named Chicago "that windy city."

East End of Machinery Hall, 1893 World's Fair, The Columbian Exposition. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

marshland — swampy, wet area

ornate — very fancy or elaborate decoration

The exposition buildings, roads, parks, and waterways were built on 630 acres of marshland seven miles south of downtown, on what is today Jackson Park. America's greatest architects designed fourteen beautiful, large, but temporary buildings to house the exhibits, which came from countries all over the world. Although the buildings looked like stone, the outside walls were made with a combination of plaster and hemp fiber; then all fourteen building were painted white. The effect dazzled visitors and the fairgrounds became known as "The White City." The large ornate buildings were filled with exhibits featuring new technologies in industry, agriculture, and domestic life. Countries in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East sent exhibits and people to illustrate the cultures of their counties. Electric lights, not gaslights fascinated fair goers and made the White City glow brightly at night.

Fairgoers came from all over Illinois and beyond to see the wonders created for their entertainment and education. One of these wonders was the first Ferris Wheel, created by bridge-builder W.

G. Ferris. The Ferris Wheel was introduced at the fair as an engineering exhibition to compete with the Eiffel Tower built for the Paris exhibition a few years earlier. The giant wheel rose 264 feet above the ground and had 26 cars carrying 60 passengers each. The passengers paid 50 cents for a ride on the big wheel, making it one of the most profitable exhibits at the exposition. Today, a Ferris Wheel is part of nearly every fair, carnival, and amusement park in America. Many new products were made available for the first time—Cracker Jacks, Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer, Aunt Jemima Syrup, Juicy Fruit Gum, hamburgers, and diet soda. The millions of people who paid 50 cents to enter the grounds were left with lifelong memories of exciting inventions and exhibits from exotic countries; new foods; beautiful architecture, parks, and statues; and an overwhelming impression that life in American was changing for the better as the twentieth century approached.

The 1983 World's Fair Ferris Wheel. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

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